

Portrayal of the Muslim community and Islam by Indian cinema post 9/11: An analysis

Abstract

Indian cinema has been a mirror to the multidimensional nature of the subcontinent, be it in its portrayal of Indian culture, society, castes, classes, politics, art, or religion. Movies like *Bombay* depict the trauma of an inter-religious love and marriage of a young Hindu man and a beautiful Muslim woman, and their ultimate triumph, amidst a communal riot. Muslim terrorism was depicted in movies like *Roja*, *Mission Kashmir*, *Maachis* and others, with Kashmir and the Indo-Pakistan conflict as the theme. Minorities especially Muslims, as spies, traitors, or smugglers, has been a common theme in commercial cinema. This paper attempts to examine the representation of a minority community— the Muslims- in Indian cinema post 9/11. The paper presents a content analysis of the films *New York*, *Anwar* and *Vishwaroopam*. Predominantly, so far, the representation of this minority community in Indian cinema has remained within the dominant discourse, even in its stereotyping.

Key words: Indian cinema, portrayal, Muslims, post 9/11, content analysis, stereotyping.

Introduction

In this era of communication explosion, wars begin and end with media (MEŠIĆ, Mirza). The media play a significant role in the process of social construction of reality and can be used as a potent weapon to mould and sculpt people's perceptions, as the information that individuals are exposed to greatly influence their perception of the world. In short, we amble about with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson, 1992).

Simply put, the media shape the world as we see it. In fact the prime objective of media is to shape public opinion, and reshape it again if needed (Khan & Bokhari, 2011).

All the same today no discussion is complete without taking into account the role of media in representing concerns of the citizens.

It has grown into an important and immensely powerful institution, which kick starts debates, paves path for dialogue, and shapes public consciousness (Kumar, 2011).

The concept of social construction of reality includes the ideas of socialization by which individuals make sense of the world through various variables, one of which is the mass media. The media can be seen as a socializing agent by constructing reality and then disseminating this reality to the public (Pollok). The public in turn reconstructs this mediated reality. The process by which the media interpret and construct the world, or external reality for us is called representation.

Indian cinema has been a mirror to the multidimensional nature of the subcontinent, be it in its portrayal of Indian culture, society, castes, classes, politics, art, or religion. A major theme peculiar to Indian cinema has been the portrayal of love and the opposition faced by the lovers- ending either in their union, separation or even death – a major threat to their union being religious differences, apart from caste and class (*Chemeen, Julie, Marocharitram, Laila Majnu, Gadar, Veer Zara*).

While films on communal riots in post independent, post partition India have been made to critical acclaim and with commercial success, movies as recent as '*Bombay*' (1995) depict the trauma of an inter-religious love and marriage of a young Hindu man and a beautiful Muslim woman, and their ultimate triumph, amidst a communal riot. Muslim terrorism was depicted in movies like *Roja* (1992), *Mission Kashmir*, *Maachis* and others, with Kashmir and the Indo-Pakistan conflict as the theme. Minorities especially Muslims, as spies, traitors, or smugglers, has been a common theme in commercial cinema. Equally popular are themes with minorities (again, especially Muslims) as patriots who don't hesitate to give up their lives for their country. Movies like *Amar Akbar Anthony* have a colourful, romantic and fun portrayal of Muslims and have endeared them to the audiences (Nafisa H. Kattarwala). Kattarwala credits Hindi cinema with also having tried time and again, to represent Islam as the religion of love (*Love & God, Laila Majnu*).

In '*Chak De*', the Muslim Hockey coach of the Indian women's Hockey team takes it upon himself to prove his patriotism to the country and ensures that the team wins the world cup. He is forced to prove himself after he loses the finals in

the Men's Hockey match as captain, against the Pakistani team and is accused of being a traitor. It has to be mentioned that even in movies where Muslims are depicted in a negative manner (as terrorists, for example) there are smaller, less important Muslim characters that are portrayed in a positive light. But the terrorist is always a Muslim.

Malayalam cinema is probably the more secular in its approach to portrayal of the Islamic protagonist- this is a reflection of the Malayalam society, which is considered far more tolerant and secular than most societies in India (*Chemmeen*, *Ustaad Hotel*, *His Highness Abdullah*). *Ustaad Hotel* portrays three generations of a Muslim family, the first generation protagonist is the 'good', patriotic Muslim, while the second generation protagonist is the neo rich 'Gulf Muslim' and the third is the more 'modern' generation (M.S. Hyas, 2012). The movie is more a subtle message on family planning, according to Hyas.

Post 9/11, '*My name is Khan*' was a bold attempt to negate the fast emerging stereotyped image of the Muslim as a global terrorist, with the main protagonist of the movie, a Muslim, constantly repeating the phrase, "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist." The fact that he has Asperger's Syndrome, and says only what he means, is an alibi to his statement "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist". You have to believe him.

'*Viswaroopam*' (2013) directed by noted Tamil Actor and Director Kamal Hassan, deals with global Islamic terrorism. While the terrorists are Muslims, the man who infiltrates their camp and foils their plans of terrorist attacks in the U.S., is also a Muslim.

In their content analysis of 50 Hindi movies, Muhammad Ashraf Khan and Syeda Zuria Bokhari (2011) aimed to identify the slant or treatment given to Muslims in these movies. They found that an overwhelming number of movies had an unfavourable representation of Muslims (65.2%), while 30.4% of the portrayal was neutral. An insignificant 4.4% of the portrayal was favourable. As many as ten parameters were considered for the rating (including dress, motivation, profession, patriotism among others).

Khan and Bokhari also note the paradigm shift in the portrayal of Muslims in Hindi cinema, from movies on Muslims as emperors and Mughals (*Mughal e Azam*, *Taj Mahal*, *Razia Sultana*), to the Jihadis in the late 1980s and 1990s (*Roja*, *Mission Kashmir*,

Sarfaroosh, Fiza, Fanaa). Now it is the Muslim as a global terrorist (*Kurbaan, Vishwaroopam*). Apart from the Muslim historical, rarely has a Muslim been the main protagonist or hero except probably in Malayalam cinema.

In his analysis of Hindi cinema, Maidul Islam (2007) accuses Bollywood (the Hindi film industry in India) of depicting the Indian Muslim as one who gives precedence to his religion rather than to his country. He further accuses Bollywood as portraying the Muslim either as 'feudal landlords or terrorists, villains and gangsters'.

The study

Three movies: the first, the Hindi movie *New York* (2009), the second, the 2012 Malayalam movie *Anwar*, and third, the controversial Tamil movie *Vishwaroopam* (2013) show three different aspects of the impact of the 9/11 attack on the perception and understanding of the Muslim community and Islam.

The movies will be analysed for their portrayal of Islamic terrorism post 9/11, the representation of Muslims, and to identify stereotypes if any. It will also try to answer the question, do the Indian films represent the reality of the Muslim community or are just portraying a warped image of the community.

New York

Yashraj films is one of the largest production houses in Hindi cinema, famous for movies of the romance genre.

New York depicts the plight of Muslims in America in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Islamic terrorism makes victims out of the ordinary Muslims living in America, by creating a wave of distrust and antagonism against the community as a whole. 1200 men of foreign origin were illegally detained and tortured in the months following 9/11 (see post script of the movie) by a panic-stricken nation shaken at the terror acts in its soil that killed thousands of innocent civilians.

The Hindu heroine, Maya, is the neutral character in the film, which is essentially a conflict between the Christian and Muslim, the American and the Asian, symbolized by the very American Sam, who turns out to be the Asian Samir Aziz post 9/11. The Christian-Muslim antagonism and conflicts go back a long time, and Islam is held largely guilty of the degradation of the Christian

West, thanks to the rise of Islam and occupation of newer territories by Islam, resulting in a 'loss' for Christianity (Omar Abdullah Bagabas, 1996).

When the going is great, pre 9/11, the college hero is Sam, of Indian origin with a father who is a professor in Indian culture. As a new student, he competes with a senior and wins, the challenge being the first to raise the American flag atop the college building.

Omar Aijaz, whose Muslim identity is unmistakable from the start, is from India, goes to New York as a student, two years before the 9/11 bombings. Maya, Sam and Omar, each as different from the other in character as chalk and cheese, soon strike a close friendship.

When the 9/11 terror bombing is shown live on TV, it is Maya and Sam who shed tears. It is at this point that Omar breaks away from the group, bitterly disappointed to find that Maya, whom he loves, is in love with Sam. He does not hear of them nor do they of him, for the next seven years. As he reminisces later, "That one day changed our lives forever."

The third Muslim protagonist is the FBI South East Asia Agent with a more typically Hindu name: Roshan- and you think he is a Hindu until he discloses to Omar that he is a Muslim.

The movie opens with the seizing of weapons in a taxi in New York. The owner, Omar Aijaz is detained by the FBI, which has deliberately planted the weapons. He is accused of being a terrorist by Roshan, the FBI Agent. Omar asks in sincere bewilderment and shock, "Terrorism? What does that mean?". He is forced to tell his story of life in America when he first came there as a student nine years earlier, and the details of his friendship with Maya and Sam.

Omar is detained for a purpose- the FBI Agent, Roshan, wants evidence that Samir is the head of a terrorist sleeper cell in New York. His 'men' are identified as terrorists- all Muslims-from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. He is asked to do an undercover job for the FBI, in return for his freedom. Omar again denies in shocked disbelief: "I am not a terrorist and neither can Sam be one".

Omar finally relents: not because he is cowed down, but because he wants to prove the innocence of his friend and himself.

Roshan teaches him how to handle a gun when he realizes that Omar has never held one. To his statement, "You must have fired many guns", Omar snaps in irritation, "Yes, during Diwali". (In India, toy guns with strips of tiny balls of gunpowder are shot by children during Diwali, a festival characterized by lighting of lamps and bursting crackers to celebrate the victory of 'good over evil'.) A Hindu festival enjoyed by a Muslim boy in India.

Omar enters the lives of Sam, Maya (who are now husband and wife) and their young son. When Omar does find out that Samir is indeed the head of a sleeper group- one which is identified as indulging in suspicious activities pointing towards terrorism, but not yet got into action as a terrorist group- he is devastated.

The fun-loving, charismatic all American Sam, is now Sameer Aziz, whose horrifying experience as an illegal detainee on suspicion of having terrorist links, turns him into a bitter Muslim, who wants nothing but to take revenge. Stories of degrading treatment of suspected Muslims during their illegal detention is seen through the eyes of the protagonist Sam, and his employee Zilgal, who Maya is trying to help as a human rights worker. Zilgal finally kills himself, unable to "live and face the insult everyday".

When Omar tries to get Roshan's sympathy for Sameer, the FBI agent counters, "Nothing justifies terrorism" to which Omar shoots back, "It is you (FBI) who make terrorists"

Roshan who sees the larger picture, fights Islamic terrorism for the larger good of the Muslim community in the world, to "transform the hostility into a sense of goodwill for Muslims": He refuses to accept that Islam preaches violence. "If you favour Islam then you favour peace" he insists.

Omar soon learns that Maya is also aware of this dark side of Samir. Maya is the perfect alibi to Sam, being a Hindu, and working at the Human Rights Office. Maya agrees to talk to the FBI on condition that they don't target Sam, who has not committed any known terrorist act so far.

Samir is however, caught planting bombs on the FBI building (no less) and killed. Maya is also mistakenly shot at and killed in the shoot-out.

Omar adopts their son who is seen as a happy child, accepted by the community and the hero of his baseball team. And this, says Roshan, justifies the death of men like Sameer Aziz.

New York as a Yashraj movie, portrays love and peace, and is largely sympathetic towards the ordinary Muslim. Ironically, it is the Hindu who loves and accepts Sam turned Sameer. The three main male protagonists are Muslims- and two of them are men of 'peace'. It is interesting that neither Omar nor Roshan undergo the humiliating torture and treatment soon after 9/11, as Sam does. This is seen as justifying Sam's later attempts at terrorist acts. The movie however, hastens to add, through Roshan, that "nothing justifies terrorism".

Kattarwala in her analysis, states that Indian films do not go deep into the 'mystical connotations' of Islam, but rather lets the Muslim character carry his beliefs of Islam on his shoulder. Therefore it is not so much a portrayal of Islam as a religion, but the portrayal of Islam as it is perceived to be, by the protagonist. In *New York*, Islam as a religion is not dealt with, except when Roshan declares that preventing Muslims from becoming terrorists was imperative for the world to respect and accept Islam as a peaceful religion. He is able to foresee the future of the Muslim and his religion -the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists and Islam as a religion that preaches violence. Samir never speaks of Islam or of himself as a Muslim, even when he is planning terror attacks in America. It is more a personal revenge, especially since he plants bombs on the FBI building.

The movie has steered clear of several familiar stereotypes- the namaaz, the kurta pyjama, the cap, and so on. Muslim women are conspicuous by their absence. Sam and Omar are shown as thoroughly modern young men, and Maya as a Hindu girl, does not face any opposition to her marriage to a Muslim, who is also detainee released for want of evidence. As the wife of a Muslim, she does not face domination by her husband and is an independent woman.

Samir, as head of a sleeper group, keeps that part of his life strictly away from his family. He is the loving husband and father and tells Omar that there is no place for a gun in his house.

The movie is extremely sympathetic of the ordinary Muslim. There is no 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim'; it is only the victimized Muslim. If anything is stereotyped, then it is the FBI. It

acts rashly, and is a law unto its own. However, the agent Roshan is shown as a sane voice with the right perspective of his religion, Islam, and is anxious to prove to the world that, "If you (the Muslim) favour Islam, you favour peace."

Anwar

Written and directed by Amal Neerad, *Anwar* is an attempt to clear the misconceptions and hostility towards Islam, and the ordinary Muslim. This movie, like *New York*, focuses on the ordinary Muslim as the victim of Islamic terrorism- literally. *Anwar* is a criticism of terrorism which according to the film, is un-Islamic and tries to send this message to terrorists and those who support terrorism. The film refers to the bombings in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu in the early 2000s.

An interesting dimension to the vengeance theme, the victim here is a Muslim whose family is killed in the terrorist bombing of a textile shop not in Kerala, but in the bordering Tamil Nadu city, Coimbatore. Being a Muslim helps Anwar, the protagonist, get into the terrorist gang and gain the trust of the leader, a businessman, fondly called Babu (Babu Sait). He works in tandem with the police, and manages to finally kill all the masterminds of the Coimbatore blasts.

On the surface, the movie is the story of revenge of an ordinary Muslim, victimized by the men of his own religion, who did not have the right perception of what Islam in the name of Allah, propagated and wished them to follow.

Anwar is bold in its reference to Muslims and Islam. All suspects who are rounded up and detained after the blasts are Muslims. A Muslim girl, Ayesha, is also arrested, on charges of having signed the outpass of a large consignment of the chemical used in the bombs. She is a chemical engineer and also happens to be Anwar's fiancée. Babu Sait, who is a much respected man of the community, is also finally arrested.

In their conversation, when the police chief, Stalin Manimaran (a name that could suggest that he is a Christian, a Hindu or both) asks Babu Sait if he knows the reason why he is arrested, the latter replies, " Because I am a Muslim". To which the Chief responds, "Have I arrested all the Muslims in the city?" and Babu Sait retorts, "You are feeling sorry about (not being able to do) that."

The Police are criticized for treating any Muslim as a suspect. One of Babu Sait's gang observes angrily, "They are arresting people who wear caps and have moustaches", "...like all Muslims are terrorists", as Babu Sait comments to Anwar when they have a conversation in the prison where they are detained. Anwar, who is desperate to find where his fiancée is jailed, is roughed up by the policeman at a station, "Listen to your name...How did you get the courage to come and shout here?"

The Muslim, in short, is typecast as a terrorist or a 'prospective' terrorist by society. This 'Islamophobia' is not peculiar to India. A 2004 report by the UK Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia titled *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, states that among other things, a constant negative portrayal of Muslims in the media has almost isolated the community in Britain, and calls it 'a dangerous trend' (Dr Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dr Bianca Smith, 2005)

Though the Namaaz, the white cap and the all-pervasive Biriyani are shown to reinforce Muslim identities, it is all typical Malayalee. There is no sign of the Mosque – the Mosque seems to be too big a symbol to handle - but Allah's greatness or what Allah wants from a 'true' Muslim is represented throughout the movie. The film focuses on this concept of the 'true Muslim' or 'believer' and highlights the differences in the perceptions of the ordinary Muslim and the Islamic terrorist about who a true believer or true Muslim is.

Babu Sait refers to Muslims as 'My people' and when he inducts Anwar into terrorism, he uses Allah's name, "If you are a true believer and your belief is in danger, then you should be ready to fight...Allah will want you to protect, not do hawaala (for which he is allegedly caught and detained in prison)". When Anwar proves himself worthy of his trust, Babu Sait introduces him to another terrorist mastermind, Basheer, as the "New hero". The irony is that Islamic terrorism has given birth to a new hero, but not for them – he is their nemesis and the hero for the ordinary Muslim. The terms 'Jihad' and 'Jihadis' are also used: "Each blast will create a Jihad for us...The more number of Muslims arrested, the more Jihadis we will recruit".

Interestingly, without commenting on it, the movie also brings out the lack of a 'cause' in the terrorists. The motive seems to be to create waves of fear and insecurity in the society, but the

fact that the ordinary Muslim is also a part of that society is ignored by the terrorist.

Before Anwar takes his revenge on the ten foreign terrorists who are responsible for the Coimbatore blasts, he does his namaaz and hails his God, "Allah O Akbar" (Allah the Great) and kills them. He also destroys the ship laden with weapons, meant for a terrorist attack on Mumbai.

He then confronts Babu Sait, who tells him, "No believer will forgive you". To which Anwar says, "It is your belief that is wrong. When people come to know the truth about you, Muslims will not forgive you".

Vishwaroopam, produced and directed by the versatile Tamil actor producer Kamal Hassan created controversy immediately after its release. Several groups went up in arms against the portrayal of Islam in the film. Ultimately, the movie was withdrawn and re-released after certain scenes in the movie were edited.

Vishwaroopam is probably the first Tamil film to have a Muslim character as a hero (Atul Tiwari, 2013). Set in the US and Afghanistan, it is the story of an Indian Secret Agent, out to bust a terrorist operation in the US. The title *Vishwaroopam* refers to the universal forms of the Hindu God Vishnu, who is born on earth in several *avatars*, to vanquish evil. It is no surprise then, that Osama bin Laden is referred to as 'the Asura' (traditional foes of the Gods, in Hindu mythology). The protagonist similarly takes on different avatars during his mission. The audience first see him as Viswanathan (another name for God Vishnu, meaning Lord of the Universe), a kathak dancer, who has a 'marriage of convenience' with a nuclear scientist. They hardly have a marriage going, and it is only when Viswanathan and his wife are caught by the terrorists working for the Afghan terror mastermind Omar Bhai, does she realize that Viswanath is actually a Muslim. While she is stunned to find that her husband is a Muslim (which is his actual Avatar) she is more fascinated by his sheer physical prowess. She sees her boss with the terrorists and comments, "What, is he also a Muslim?" Vishwanath invokes the Hindu Gods and Allah before he attacks the terrorists with his hands tied.

The movie then goes into a flashback, narrated by Omar Bhai, a terrorist mastermind. The scene now moves to Afghanistan - the protagonist is actually an undercover agent in Afghanistan,

training the Al Queida. Life in Afghanistan with the Al Queida is full of stereotypes. Boys who dress up like girls and dance to please a crowd are punished severely. Children play with toy guns on the streets. Shops openly sell bullets and guns.

The Al Queida sends boys on suicide missions. One such incident is covered by the English press and the shops on the streets of Afghanistan proudly hang the newspaper. Vishwanath is witness to the brutal killing of a prisoner, and it is being recorded for the world to see. One of the prominent men in the group is wrongly accused of being a 'traitor' and is hanged at the village square. The men call out to Allah: 'Allah O Akbar' as he is hanged. There are periodic NATO air strikes - women and children are the victims. The Al Queida men keep shifting base within Afghanistan.

Omar, who speaks excellent English and is technically savvy, is a typical fundamentalist Muslim and is symbolic of the Al Queida. As the protagonist is taken to his house, his wife is being checked by a lady doctor. He orders her, "...Cover your feet, cover your face and get out of my village". He is against his young son learning English, and punishes one of the older boys for teaching his son English. The young son, who wants to be a doctor, is mature beyond his age, whereas, the boy who is chosen to be a suicide bomber is dreamy and finds pleasure in a childlike pastime like swinging. Omar Bhai does not want his son to be a doctor - he has trained him to identify guns blindfolded. The mother is against this, and the son and mother are shown playing doctor-patient games in the father's absence.

Muslim women have absolutely no voice, boys are shown to be trained to be future terrorists and Muslim girls are conspicuous by their absence.

Back in New York, the black boy who plants the bomb does his namaaz before he leaves the house. How the bomb is diffused in the nick of time forms the rest of the story.

The 'hero' being a Muslim does not really help the 'image' of Islam, this despite the Hindu avatar being the weaker one and his Muslim avatar the authoritative one. The protagonist is seen through the eyes of his wife - as a package of pleasant if impossible surprises to her, she who had earlier seen him in his dancer avatar and had given up on him. To Omar Bhai and to the Al Queida, he is a 'traitor'.

The movie does not really tell anything different from the mainstream news media coverage of the Al Qaeda and the Taliban – the protests were more against the portrayal of Islam as a violent religion. The following scenes/audio were edited out before the second screenings of the movie (Karthick S, 2013):

- All 'objectionable' background recitations of the Quran were muted.
- In the scene where the American is hacked to death, the background with a picture of a verse from the Quran is blurred.
- The prayer scene and the background prayers are beeped out in the final sequence before the protagonist diffuses the bombs.
- All references to Tamil Jihadis were edited out.
- The mention of Mullah Omar having stayed in Madurai and Coimbatore was removed.
- A scene in which one of the senior Afghan leaders says that it is the duty of the Muslims to eliminate non-Muslims was censored.

Conclusion

All the three movies that were analysed were made post the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The representation of the Muslim community in these movies was to a great extent close to reality. The aftermath of the terror attacks saw several thousand Muslims in the U.S detained based on suspicion and were subjected to cruel treatment during their detainment (*New York*, 2009).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) following September 11, 2001, reported a 1,700 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslim Americans between 2000 to 2001 (Anderson).

In the film *New York*, the director has tried to bring forth the anguish, suspicion and finger pointing faced by the Muslim community in the aftermath of the attacks. The plight of innocent ordinary Muslims who if not for the misfortune of being a Muslim would have leaded a normal life like any other is well depicted. The movie has attempted to break free from the usual stereotyping of Muslims. The two main Muslim characters shown are suave and confident, with a positive outlook in life before the terror attacks.

The film *Anwar* was also a successful attempt in portraying the plight of the Muslim community in the aftermath of a terror attack. The ordinary Muslim is victimized in two ways: One by Islamic terrorism (Sam in *New York* and Anwar in *Anwar*), and two, by the society at large, where every terror attack is associated with this minority community and every other Muslim becomes a target of suspicion.

Both *New York* and *Anwar* focus on these consequences of Islamic terrorism on the ordinary Muslim. *Anwar* is bolder in its commentary on what Islam propagates and what being a 'true believer' means. Both the movies are largely sympathetic to the plight of the ordinary Muslim.

The film *Vishwaroopam* though, triggered worldwide protests from Muslim organizations for the portrayal of Islam. The film had all the stereotypic elements associated with the community. The terrorists were shown to be Muslims sporting beards, skull caps and performing the namaaz. The movie, however, is more an action packed thriller, with the villain and the hero being shown as Muslims.

Predominantly, so far, the representation of this minority community in Indian cinema has remained within the dominant discourse, even in its stereotyping. Since the medium of cinema is a powerful one with immense reach, it is important to exercise caution while using the medium to convey sensitive issues.

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